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ABSTRACT

A college course in American culture, designed for students of English as a second language as an introduction to both American culture and university content courses, is described. The course was developed based on the philosophy and techniques of ethnography and foreign language pedagogy, and requires a combination of student participation, observation, and meta-observation. Students assume the role of scientific investigator, guided by the teacher as principal informant. The objective is a description, rather than an analysis, of the culture without forcing students to assimilate or adapt to it, an effort that might cause a negative reaction. The first part of the syllabus introduces the concept and definitions of ethnography and the definition of culture. The second part consists of teacher lectures, field trips, and guest speakers, with discussions, briefings, and debriefings. The topical and chronological schedules for the semester are provided, and a bibliography is appended. (MSE)

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AMERICAN CULTURE: COURSE DESIGN AND RATIONALE

INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that communicative competence in a second language (L2) involves something more than mastering the phonology, syntax, lexicon, and morphology of that language (see the rather extensive bibliography in Taylor, 1983, pp.86-88); unless appropriate affective usage of those elements is also mastered, one will still be speaking with a foreign accent of the deepest kind: violation of cultural norms. John Gumperz has suggested that turning L2 speakers into ethnographers is an excellent way for them to develop the self-consciousness necessary to understand their own violations of the foreign culture's norms.* An American culture course built on an ethnographic model is unquestionably useful in the process of language acquisition on the most profound level.

Language itself carries out norms; to learn one is to learn the other. 'Children acquire their culture by watching and listening to adults and then making inferences about the cultural rules for behavior; with the acquisition of language, the learning accelerates' (Spradley, 1980, p.10). An American culture course for L2 learners can replicate this process by teaching the techniques of participation, observation, and meta-observation, rather than by teaching appropriate behavior per se. These techniques form the basis of ethnography, the science of cultural description, a branch of anthropology, making it the logical vehicle for a content course in culture for L2 learners.

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Cultural values gathered from scholarly sources (e.g., Samovar et al., 1981) can be enumerated in the classroom by the teacher; and they can be validated outside the classroom in a manner that simulates how one learns one's native culture (C1). This approach to teaching culture synthesizes deductive and inductive learning styles. That is, students meet with both traditional, formal education techniques (e.g., lectures) and experiential opportunities in a variety of natural cultural settings.

Just as children learn their C1 through exposure to raw data (which becomes input as it is processed in the learners' minds), adult foreign learners, both C2 and L2, can induce generalizations from data they are exposed to. The conditions are: (1) sufficient amounts of data and of process time; and (2) guidance of an enlightened informant. In regard to (1), this pedagogic model has a flexible time-and-event component built into it (see Flowing Syllabus, below), so that the course pivots on the variable of the learners' own pace, as shown by demand and interest. Regarding (2), 'guidance' means only selecting, pointing out, and referring to, since anything stronger will appear as 'attempting assimilation or adaptation, thereby increasing the negative effects of acculturation and hampering the language learning process itself' (Alptekin, 1981, p.275). (About 'informant,' see Auto-Ethnography, below.)

DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

How culture is defined must be compatible with the principles of ethnography so that using the investigative techniques of the latter will not clash with the matter under investigation. It is important to note that 'culture' has a popular usage, synonymous with 'the arts.' It has been said, for example, that Los Angeles has very little culture.

This statement is designed to refer to a supposed lack of Western European-based art forms such as dance and theater, and such statements are not useful for American culture classes, since they are non-descriptive value judgments. (Creations of human artistic expression are themselves an integral part of such courses, since they are actual, tangible products of a culture.)

Culture viewed from the ethnographic perspective, which ideally is akin to the native point of view, means the medium in which a person grows up. It is a composite of the ways that members of a society look at their physical and social world. It is the shared background knowledge that allows social life to take place, the 'capabilities acquired or elicited in social life' (Hymes, 1974, p.20f.n.). It is the soft soil out of which its articulations, e.g., architecture, cuisine, grow and take shape. 'Culture is an interwoven system of signs whose meaning can be known only by means of knowing the imaginative universe of the minds of native members of that culture' (Geertz, 1973, p.13).

Although a culture as a whole is thus too overwhelming (and too slippery) for a single course, a selection of these 'signs' can be examined. The fact that they are 'interwoven' in a culture helps to create the flowing syllabus of the course. Ethnography provides access to 'the natives' imaginative universe.'

EXPLANATION OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography developed in the 1920's-'30's out of dissatisfaction with the lack of rigor in so-called armchair anthropology. Basically, ethnography functions as the 'hands-on' training of engineers or the internship of doctors (Vivelo, 1980, p.346). It attempts to discover the native significance within situations (Goodenough quoted in Moerman,

1969, p.465). The goals of ethnography are straightforward: to make sense of what is going on and be able to paraphrase that sense in a way acceptable to native members (Agar, 1980, p.79). And, 'assuming that life is not random in any given culture, we must discover that order' (Moerman, 1969, p.464).

The result of an ethnographic investigation is a description of the culture rather than an analysis; accordingly, two tenets of the science are: (1) disallowance of cultural comparisons; and (2) disallowance of value judgments. It is primarily because of its emphasis on describing what is discovered firsthand through one's own sense data or through interviewing native informants that ethnography succeeds as the course model. Stereotypes of American behavior and customs are widespread,due to the political, economic, and artistic impact of the U.S. internationally, and foreign students bring many of these with them when they come to this country. Using ethnography as the means of cultural investigation precludes analysis, so that students are in the position of having to keep their bias to themselves while looking at American phenomena for what it is.

Ethnography draws no conclusions; it looks at what it sees with careful, precise, but never critical, eyes. Its main tasks are (1) to solicit information and (2) to organize the information gathered. To understand a culture from the point of view of a native entails going through any steps and procedures necessary to be able to reduplicate that 'universe' for oneself, even if only in an abstract, intellectual sense.

The practical principle of ethnography, participant-observation, is basically inductive. One experiences the cultural phenomena from the inside (participating in the event) while deciding what is actually taking place and how much like a native one is acting (observing and

meta-observing). In the ethnographic stance, one is not supposed to 'go native,' thereby minimizing the 'threat of anomie arising from what is perceived as the meaninglessness of the integrative strategies present in the target environment with respect to a learner's utilitarian orientations' (Alptekin, 1981, p.278).[1]

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

Teachers doing ethnographic work in their own C1 can be tricked by familiar-looking surface forms that mask decidedly different underlying structures. Auto-ethnographic teachers need to have the input of others because

> cultural 'realities' and interpretations of events among individuals in the same group are often highly variable, changing, or contradictory. Thus an insider's position is not necessarily an unchallengeable 'true' picture; it represents one possible perspective. (Hayano, 1979, p.102.)

The first step in training oneself in ethnographic investigation is to agree that one has been, like all other people, acculturated. Next comes the admission that one's degree of acculturation is unknown:

> Over the period of time we have been raised in our culture, many of the influences culture has had on us have become buried in the primitive portions of our brains beneath the neocortex, where they largely are below our levels of awareness. (Samovar et al., 1981, p.25.)

Third, given that one is no longer sure of the origins and impetus for much of one's own ideas and behaviors, one is willing to try to find out, even though the idea of 'such conditioning might seem repugnant to those of us who think of ourselves as self-motivated individuals, free thinkers who decide what we are going to do and what our fate will be' (Samovar et al., 1981, p.25). The fourth step is to adopt a learning role for oneself, a necessary outgrowth of three interrelated factors:

(a) Ethnography differs from other people-sciences in its emphasis on direct personal involvement in the community being studied;
(b) In this firsthand contact, moreover, the ethnographer is part of an asymmetrical relationship, in that the informant, not the ethnographer, is in the 'one-up' position;
(c) The ethnographer prefers to be in the one-down position because this role, like that of child or student, allows mistakes, entails extensive questions, and necessitates instruction from the culture group members. (Adapted from Agar, 1980, p. 69.)

It may feel awkward to adopt the kind of naiveté that is desirable in ethnography. However, this attitude is helpful in surmounting obstacles to two ethnographic goals: (1) recognizing patterns in events otherwise too familiar; and (2) giving the patterns cultural significance otherwise taken for granted. To help overcome their ethnocentrism, auto-ethnographers must learn about their own culture from other members of their culture. In this way, they will be 'induced to think in new ways, to enter into internal dialogues with themselves, to give up their self-assuredness, take the risk of not knowing, to learn how subjective predispositions to label and interpret the behavior of others distorts the ability to observe the behavior of others' (Hunter and Foley, 1976, p.ix-x). Auto-ethnographers must be alert for the 'old devil-friends bias, oversimplification, prior judgment, and the human inability to separate observation from feelings' (Stephenson and Greer, 1981, p.130).

Yet, there is an interplay of advantages with the disadvantages of auto-ethnography. For one thing, being fluent in the language of the target culture is a luxury for most fieldworkers. Auto-ethnographic teachers can exploit their status as linguistic experts for the benefit of their students, by, e.g., interpreting the statements of other natives, both written and oral.

Also, disadvantageous subjectivism can be translated into 'feelings

of empathy.' Personal involvement can then be an invaluable research tool. Meta-observed, to keep it out of the way of the data, empathy can:

(1) Save time
  (a) by going directly to a key event;
  (b) by avoiding superfluous questions;
  (c) by interpreting patterns insightfully;
(2) Prevent misunderstandings
  (a) by manipulating linguistic registers;
  (b) by calling on shared background knowledge.

(adapted from Stephenson and Greer, 1981, p.125.)

In addition, there can also be a feeling of such comfort and ease within one's home culture that one is willing to take what could otherwise be viewed as risks in exploration, such as talking with marginals in the culture. In general, it is not the array of problems but their intensity that differs in auto-ethnography and 'outsider' ethnography. In either case, 'self-deception is an insidious threat to thoroughness as well as to objectivity' (Stephenson and Greer, 1981, p.128).

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

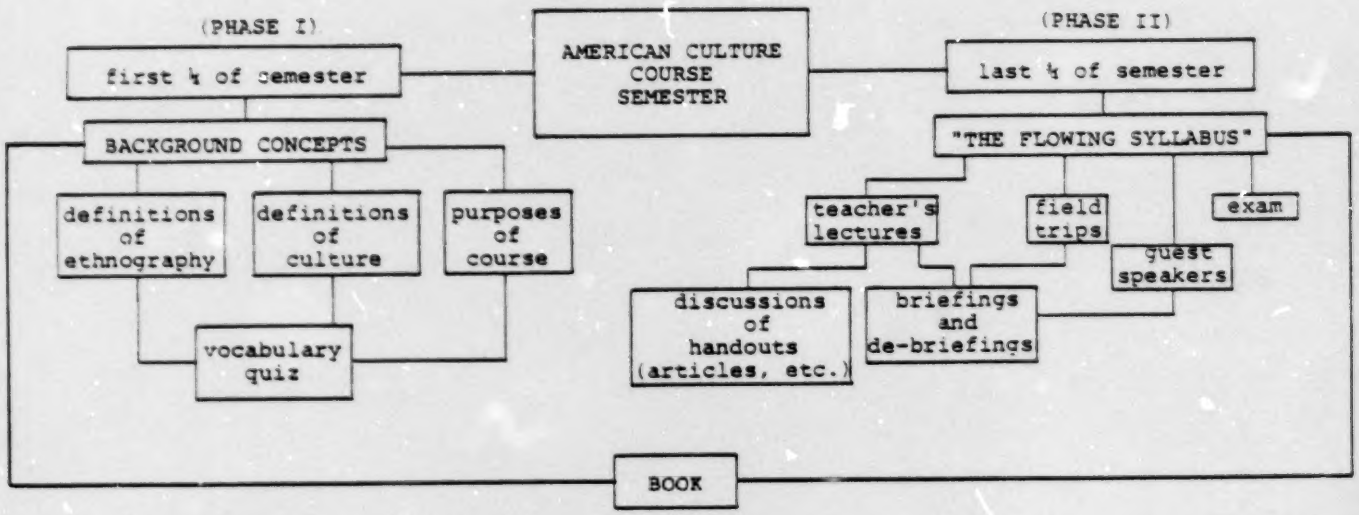
The course is designed to recreate a C1 experience in a C2 environment as well as to:

(1) orient students to American culture;
(2) give information about American academia;
(3) provide students with a role, i.e., scientific investigator.

(The following discussion of these purposes is illustrated by the flow chart on the next page.) Regarding both (1) and (2), during Phase I of the course, students are given lectures on the ethnographic approach, on the scope of the term 'culture,' and on the style of the course as a learning experience. The focus of Phase I is on key concepts such as 'ethnocentricism,' 'cultural relativism,' 'stereotype,' etc. These lectures form the foundation of the course, since they provide the working vocabulary for the rest of the semester and introduce the non-traditional manner in which the class will function later. Equally important during Phase I is the presentation of the teacher's philosophy

of education; the students must have a firm idea of what they are expected to do in this class and emphasis needs to be placed on explaining how they are to participate in order to learn. This explanation may be a first exercise in meta-observation.

FLOW CHART
AMERICAN CULTURE COURSE CONSTRUCTION



The urgency for laying down a firm foundation in Phase I is that Phase II is loosely structured in order to pace itself to student interest and need and to take advantage of local current events. During Phase I, for instance, students are given many examples of American core values, e.g., self-reliance, equality, horizontal human relationships, and asked to learn them for a quiz; during the field trips of Phase II, they are asked to comment on which core values they think might be involved in the surface behavior or custom they are observing. The concept of self-reliance, for example, helps to clarify instances that could be interpreted as selfishness.

During Phase I, students are expected to listen to lectures, take notes, and ask and answer questions, just as in any college-level course in the U.S. The style of the course is academic and the focus is on the

content; at the same time, students are introduced to the style of American academia, such as discrete-point quiz strategies, teacher expectations regarding classroom behavior and homework assignments,etc.

Part of the purpose of (3) above, the role of ethnographer, is, like (1) and (2), to relieve some of the culture shock students may experience as debilitating.

> [Even while] the extreme symptoms subside,...more problems may persist and cause stress....
> ...culture shock and culture stress can induce a whole syndrome of rejection which diverts attention and energy from learning the second language.
> The first ... target of rejection is the people who speak the target language and the learner therefore has difficulty forming the identifications necessary to learn their language. (Schumann, 1978, pp.87-91.)

Schumann recommends, for example, 'providing the language learner with access to the community,' and 'giving the alien a place to start' (Schumann and Schumann, 1977, p.248).

If the students feel a little less 'alien' by having a purposeful role to fulfill, they may feel less self-conscious in their attempts to enter into American events. Having another identity while operating in a second language is protection for one's ego which is so closely tied to one's linguistic expression. ['Essentially, to learn a second language is to take on a new identity' (Schumann, 1978, p.94).] Safely inside the role of investigator students can go places and ask questions they may never have had the courage to or interest in before. 'In sum, this identity can give the adult language learner protection until he becomes independent,... and provide an entry to community-wide networks of relationships' (Larsen and Smalley quoted in Schumann, 1978, p.90).

In addition, for optimal L2 input it has been suggested that the teacher should change the setting completely, moving out of the classroom for visits to places of interest to students (d'Anglejan, 1978). Field trips provide students with many different varieties of native

input and many experiences of language in context; students are exposed to the cultural correlates of the linguistic forms and discourse strategies they are taught in ESL language classes.

Obviously, field trips are consistent with ethnographic principles. Ethnographers do their research in a culture by getting out into the field. (Reading about a culture might be preparatory work, but it is not a central duty.)

To explain further, some cultural knowledge can be presented as rules; for instance, in the area of 'proper' behavior, which is defined culturally, interruptions are usually considered rude in American culture. But there are several drawbacks to presenting an 'interruption rule.' First, the information is now in the form of etiquette, and ESL teachers are not experts in decorum. In fact, rules of propriety are personal and will vary according to social class, region of upbringing, ethnic background, age, degree of nonconformity, etc.[2] Second, culture has to be more than just a collection of rules, just as language is more than a list of grammar rules. Knowing a culture is different from knowing the social rules.

Instead, students can be told that there are cultural assumptions about interrupting in American discourse and then be asked to investigate this statement. Whatever they do next--participation, observation, interview--is ethnography. Ethnographic science is not so much specified procedures and techniques as it is that which can get us from our specific observations to general statements acceptable to natives. 'Ethnographically, we constantly inquire into what people use their culture for' (Stein, 1981, p.193). The purpose of field trips, therefore, is part exposure and part an exercise in inferring cultural implications from one's surroundings, as one did in C1.

SAMPLE PLAN

Rather than following rigid sets of activities, it is suggested in ethnographic guides that 'we develop our own methods, ones that retain a sense of context, complexity, and interaction.' (Edgerton quoted in Agar, 1980, p.76). One method that meets these requirements has been the following idea adapted from Hymes' model for analyzing speech situations in depth (Hymes, 1972, pp.56-65).

ETHNOGRAPHY of
- Setting
- Participants
- Ends
- Acts
- Keys
- Instruments
- Norms
- Genres

A worksheet is created for the specific field trip utilizing Hymes' concepts. Questions might ask to describe a playground's equipment (or sketch it), to describe the noise on the playground (who makes it and how it is made), to describe what boys do on the playground that girls don't (and vice versa), etc. The briefing for a field trip involves a thorough explanation of Hymes' terms so that the worksheet will be a meaningful guide for the experience.

FLOWING SYLLABUS[3]

Flexibility, a characteristic of ethnography, is necessary for the success of the course, since much of Phase II has to be left to (1) what life's chances bring into view; (2) what that particular group of students express interest in exploring; (3) what one chosen pathway leads to unexpectedly. As illustration, here is the distribution of events for five of the past semesters :

SEMESTER	GUEST SPEAKERS	FIELD TRIPS
1	3	2
2	1	3
3	3	6
4	5	5
5	3	8

The flexibility is reflected in the flowing syllabus; a sample flow from one semester is represented graphically below. Note how a sub-topic of one component leads naturally to another component. This organic development resembles the flow of life because a culture is the way a group of people have organized life.

FLOWING SYLLABUS SAMPLE

COMPONENT: ARCHITECTURE
sub-topics: Hollywood tour arranged by conservancy group ... tour of neighborhood with regional styles of American architecture ...

COMPONENT: DIALECTS
sub-topics: regional accents ... lexicon ... syntactic variation ... Black English ...

COMPONENT: BLACK CULTURE
sub-topics: language ... social forces and historical perspectives ... contributions to mainstream culture ...

COMPONENT: MUSIC
sub-topics: jazz ...

Because the course is created in this way, a post-hoc syllabus can be compiled at the end of the semester, based on the events participated in by the class (see page 13 for samples from one semester). This list then becomes the Table of Contents for the book of the course, which is made by collecting all course handouts, lecture notes in chronological order, playbills, etc., and binding them at a local copy center. Cost for binding plus front and back covers is $1.50. The course thus generates its own text.

CONCLUSION

The rationale for teaching an American culture course for ESL students is to give cultural context to the linguistic content of their programs. The course is not an ESL class disguised as culture nor is it a language course with bits of culture added. (And yet all language skills are exploited naturally.) The rationale for using ethnography as the procedural model for handling the cultural information is that

THE SEMESTER (TOPICALLY)

INTRODUCTORY LECTURES: Defining the concept 'culture'
Defining principles of ethnography
Defining the scope and nature of this course
FIELD TRIP: Black American folk art exhibit
FIELD TRIP: California Historical Society
FIELD TRIP: 'L.A. Seen' art exhibit
FIELD TRIP: 'L.A. Unseen' anthropological lecture
MID-TERM EXAM
GUEST SPEAKER: Black American
GUEST SPEAKER: Black American
FIELD TRIP: African-Black American debate
GUEST SPEAKER: actor
FIELD TRIP: 'The Primary English Class' live theater
FIELD TRIP: Black church service
FIELD TRIP: Soul food restaurant
(course lectures interspersed above)

THE SEMESTER (CHRONOLOGICALLY)

Week	Day	
1	1	(absent: illness)
	2	lecture: introduction of self and course
2	1	lecture: anonymous questionnaire; 'learning'; core value from newspaper article
	2	lecture: ads; purposes of course; changes in roles, procedures, and materials
3	1	lecture: course description; intro to ethnography
	2	slides: definitions of 'culture' and ethnography
4	1	lecture: definitions sheet; Feiffer cartoon (tribal rite); begin notes from Researching American Culture
	2	field trip: Black American Folk Art exhibit at Craft and Folk Art Museum
5	1	lecture: feedback museum; newspaper article; etc.
	2	field trip: California Historical Society
6	1	lecture: feedback trip; unfinished notes; Culturgrams
	2	field trip: USC gallery's 'L.A. SEEN'
7	1	writing: feedback trip; thank-you's; review concepts
	2	field trip: anthropology lecture "L.A. UNSEEN"
8	1	review
	2	test
9	1	review graded tests; 'tips for interviewers'
	2	guest speaker: Black American
10	1	guest speaker: Black American
	2	(cancelled: TESOL)
11	1	lecture: feedback TESOL; Americana catalogues; dialogue
	2	field trip: debate between Africans and Afro-Americans
12	1	lecture: feedback debate
	2	guest speaker: actor field trip: theater ('The Primary English Class')
13	1	lecture: ethnography of speaking to prepare for field trip
	2	field trip: Black church service and soul food
14	1	feedback: analysis of church service using Hymes' model
	2	evaluation and party

it allows students to investigate patterns of behavior without any attempts to encourage assimilation or adaptation, which can foster a negative reaction.

Given that an important task in ethnography is to discover the appropriate questions to ask, the American culture course is seen as a felicitous starting point in foreign students' American journey. To learn that understanding a culture is like 'reading a faded manuscript' (Geertz, 1973, p.10) requires a major mental shift. And for teachers there is the need to distinguish consciously between themselves as ethnographers (scientist role) and themselves as natives (person role); only then may they be able to maintain value neutrality sufficiently to lead students in ethnographic exploration.

In fact, ethnography is an 'irreplaceable apprenticeship' for everybody involved (Vivelo, 1980,p.345). It provides a healthy approach to life in general. 'Life will be an experience which is better understood, and thus one can be more effective in controlling it' (Hunter and Foley, 1976, p.3).

NOTES

1. Ethnographically oriented students cannot be inactive, and even the most reluctant will be somewhat involved, although we cannot control to what degree; 'the act of observing is interactive: you are always part of what you are observing' (Hunter and Foley, 1976, p.1).

2. There is nothing wrong about giving opinions as long as they are so labelled and the opinion-givers explicitly and objectively locate themselves sociologically in the culture for students to process the information. 'Assessing the validity of anthropological data includes an assessment of the characteristics, interests, and origin of the person who did the fieldwork' (Hayano, 1979, p.100).

3. An ethnographer learns something new, and then tries to understand how it connects with other aspects of the situation in which the new learning occurred.... He then tries to see if it connects with other things he has learned that are not immediately apparent--things like parts of the belief system, or the history of the group, or the wealth of the informant.... An isolated observation cannot be understood unless you understand its relationships to other aspects of the situation in which it occurred....

(Agar, 1980, p.75)

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